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ABSTRACT

Based on a secondary analysis of the Scottish School Leavers Surveys from 1978-96, a study focused on low attainment with particular reference to gender. Findings indicated the proportion of low-attainers at ordinary or standard grade had more than halved since the 1970s; it declined more among women than men. Low S4 attainment was associated with social background and neighborhood deprivation. The proportion of low-attaining S4 leavers who entered full-time employment had fallen sharply since the 1970s. By the mid-1990s, the early careers of those who entered employment were characterized by frequent switching between statuses. Only a minority of low-attaining S4 leavers were female, but when trying to find employment, the consequences of low attainment were more severe for young women. Among S4 leavers, low qualifications and unemployment after leaving school were important predictors of unemployment at age 18/19. Training reduced the risk of unemployment for young men; for young women, personal characteristics appeared to be more important. Just over half of young people with low S4 attainment gained further qualifications by age 18/19. Those who continued in full-time education were much more likely to gain further qualifications than those who entered training or employment. (YLB)

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Scottish School Leavers
Gender and Low Achievement

Scottish School Leavers Survey
Special Report II

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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE
Making it Work Together

Scottish School Leavers: Gender and Low Achievement

by Andy Biggart (School of Social and Community Sciences, University of Ulster; formerly of the Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh)

Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed a rapid expansion in educational participation and increasing levels of attainment throughout Scotland. As general levels of education have risen, policy concerns have focused increasingly on the minority who are still achieving low levels of attainment at school, especially young men who form the majority of low-attainers. This study focuses on low attainment with particular reference to gender. It examines the trends and characteristics of low achievers, the routes followed by low-attainers leaving school after S4 and whether low-attainers manage to improve the qualifications they attained at S4. It is one of a series of special studies based on the Scottish School Leavers Surveys (SSLS) commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department and conducted by the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at the University of Edinburgh.

Key findings

Our research found that:

- the proportion of low-attainers at Ordinary or Standard Grade has more than halved since the 1970s. It has declined more amongst women than amongst young men
- low S4 attainment is associated with social background and neighbourhood deprivation. Amongst young people with similar backgrounds, negative attitudes towards education are not strongly associated with low attainment
- the proportion of low-attaining S4 leavers who enter full-time employment has fallen sharply since the 1970s. By the mid-1990s the early careers of those who did enter employment were characterised by frequent switching between statuses (i.e. their careers might encompass periods of full-time and part-time employment, training and also unemployment)
- only a minority of low-attaining S4 leavers are female, but when trying to find employment the consequences low attainment for young women are more severe than for young men
- amongst S4 leavers, low qualifications and the experience of unemployment after leaving school are important predictors of unemployment at age 18/19. Training reduces the risk of unemployment for young men; for young women personal characteristics appear to be more important

- just over half of young people with low S4 attainment gain further qualifications by age 18/19. Those who continued in full-time education were much more likely to gain further qualifications than those who entered training or employment.

Background

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Young women have significantly overtaken young men in terms of attainment
Is this to do with recent changes in curriculum and assessment or can the explanation of the differences be found elsewhere?

Until relatively recently concerns about educational attainment and gender had tended to focus on the under-performance of young women. Initially these concerns were general in nature, but as the overall educational performance of young women increased, the focus was shifted towards their under-performance in specific subjects such as science and mathematics. However, in Scotland young women have increasingly outperformed young men at Standard Grade since the early 1980s, and in 1994 they outperformed young men in all subject areas at Standard Grade with the exception of Physical Education (Ganson and De Luca, 1995).

As general levels of education have increased in both sexes, policy concerns have begun to focus on the low attainment group and attention has shifted to the young men who form the majority of low-attainers. The issue in Scotland has been closely tied up with renewed concerns about social exclusion or inclusion, skill levels, economic competitiveness, lifelong learning and the restructuring of the economy. Whilst clear improvements have been made, with rising levels of attainment and participation, comparisons with our economic competitors show the relative position to be somewhat weaker. Scotland performs well at the higher educational levels but the overall participation rates in education are amongst the lowest in Europe and Scotland tends to fare badly in certain basic skills. The recent report by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in Scotland has raised concern about levels of attainment in writing, reading and numeracy in Scottish schools (HMI Audit Unit, 1999; DfEE/ Cabinet Office 1996).

Methodology

This report is based on a secondary analysis of the Scottish School Leavers Surveys (SSLS) from 1978 up until 1996. The SSLS is a postal survey of school leavers and was conducted every two years between 1977 and 1991 by the CES, in partnership with the Scottish Office, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and other sponsors. Since 1992 it has been carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (formerly SCPR), funded by the Scottish Office (subsequently the Scottish Executive) with additional support in 1993 from Strathclyde Regional Council.

Three main data-sets have been used in the analysis:

- the trends data-set which covers leavers from the years 1978–1990, surveyed in the spring after leaving school

- the Reconstructed Cohort, which reconstructs the year group in S4 in 1991–92 by selecting S4 leavers from the 1992 leavers' survey, S5 leavers from the 1993 leavers' survey and S6 leavers from the 1994 leavers' survey, with data collected from all three groups in spring 1995 at age 18/19
- the spring 1997 survey of the previous year's S4.

The Reconstructed Cohort and the spring 1997 surveys represented the most recent survey data available on their respective age groups.

For the sake of clarity, years quoted in the report refer to the year of leaving school rather than the year the survey was conducted. Our definition of low attainment includes all those who failed to achieve any Standard Grades at grades 1 to 3 or, in earlier years, Ordinary Grades at A to C. While it does not correspond to the distinction between Credit, General and Foundation levels of Standard Grade, this definition has been adopted to ensure a consistent definition across the years. The surveys cover leavers from mainstream education only. Although it is increasingly common for young people with Records of Needs to attend mainstream schools, low-attaining young people educated within specialist institutions have been excluded from the surveys.

The characteristics of low-attainers

Low attainment declined dramatically among both sexes over the period covered by the surveys (1978–96). The proportion of young men achieving no Ordinary Grades at A–C or Standard Grades at 1–3 fell steadily from 40 per cent in 1978 to 20 per cent in 1996. In 1978 the proportion of low-attaining young women was comparable to that of young men, but since then young women have improved their position at a faster rate. By 1996, the proportion achieving no Standard Grades at 1–3 was only 12 per cent of young women compared with 20 per cent of young men.

We used the 1997 survey to explore the factors associated with low S4 attainment in 1996, and found social background and area characteristics were the strongest predictors of low attainment. Low-attainers were more likely to come from working-class (manual) backgrounds, to live in council or other rented accommodation, and to live in areas of neighbourhood deprivation as indicated by a scale based on Census data. These factors were all related to low attainment, and disadvantage tended to be cumulative. However, even when these background and area factors were taken into account, some schools performed better than others in terms of the attainment of their pupils.

We found limited evidence to support the view that low-attaining young people, especially young men, had very negative attitudes towards education, or that disaffection was a principal cause of low attainment. Low-attainers had slightly more

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Factors associated with a young person's social background were the most important predictors of low attainment for both sexes.
What should be the focus of attempts to raise standards of attainment?

negative attitudes than their better-qualified peers, but substantial proportions of low-attainers expressed positive attitudes towards school and their teachers. Once social background factors were taken into consideration, attitudes were a poor predictor of low attainment amongst young men, although negative attitudes to teachers were associated with low attainment amongst young women.

Low-attaining young men were a less homogeneous group in their characteristics and behaviour than the low-attaining young women. Their social-class composition was broader: more low-attaining young men than low-attaining young women came from middle-class (non-manual) backgrounds. The differences between low-attaining young men and better-qualified young men, although often statistically significant, were as not as wide as we might expect. Amongst young women, the differences between low-attainers and those with better qualifications were clearer. They appeared to form a more distinct group compared to the better qualified young women, and had the most deprived social backgrounds; they received less parental encouragement and were much more likely to truant and hold negative attitudes towards school and the teachers.

Low-attainers' post-school routes

Although there has been a trend for more low-attaining young people to remain at school beyond S4, many low-attainers continue to leave school at the earliest opportunity. The major changes in the labour market that have occurred over the last two decades have had a radical effect on low-attaining young people leaving school from S4. The surveys document the sharp decline in the proportion leaving school and entering directly into employment, which more than halved over the period. The decline in employment was, however, largely offset by participation in training, which tended to follow the economic cycle. Despite numerous changes to training programmes and attempts to create a training route in its own right, many low-attainers continued to enter 'ordinary' employment, when they could find it, rather than training. The abolition of benefits for most 16 and 17 year olds in 1988 appeared to have only a short-lived impact on participation in training. The first surveys after the change showed more school leavers entering training programmes, especially low-attaining young men, and fewer leavers reporting that they were unemployed; but later surveys showed a decline in participation in training programmes and an increase in unemployment.

We examined the routes followed by low-attaining S4 leavers in the Reconstructed Cohort over the three-year period after leaving school, between 1992 and 1995. Their early careers were highly unstable. A small proportion found their way into stable employment on leaving school, but the routes of the majority were characterised by frequent switching between full- and part-time employment, training and unemployment. In particular, high proportions of young people left training prematurely, although many of them left to enter full-time employment.

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Low-attainers' early careers are characterised by instability, with frequent switching between employment, training and unemployment.
How can careers and guidance provision help?

There were considerable differences between the early careers of low-attaining young men and women. While more young women entered employment on leaving school they had much lower levels of participation in training programmes (Table 1). This may reflect gender-segmented training and employment opportunities. The longer-term consequences of low attainment for young women seemed particularly severe. Whereas low-attaining young men gradually drifted towards employment in the three years after leaving school, increasing proportions of low-attaining young women became unemployed or withdrew from the labour market altogether, and only a third were in full-time jobs in 1995 at age 18/19. Of those who experienced an early spell of unemployment, a significant proportion had children early.

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Although fewer in number, low-attaining young women face much a higher risk of unemployment than similarly qualified young men.
Are these young women adequately catered for?

Table 1: Destinations of low-attaining S4 leavers

	Destination after leaving school (Oct 1992)		Destination at age 18/19 (Spring 1995)	
	Males %	Females %	Males %	Females %
Employment	28	40	56	35
Training Programme	41	10	6	3
Unemployed	21	28	28	43
College	9	17	1	2
Part-time Work	2	3	9	4
Something Else	-	3	-	14
(n)	(348)	(220)	(348)	(220)

Low attainment appears to be much less of a handicap in the labour market for young men. Among male leavers from S4, low-attainers were less likely than their better-qualified peers to have been continually employed or to have completed training programmes, and they showed a greater degree of instability in the routes they followed. However, most of them were employed at age 18/19 and the differences between low-attaining and better-qualified male S4 leavers were small. Those who gained no Standard Grade awards at any level were at particular risk of unemployment at age 18/19, as were those who had become unemployed soon after leaving school and those who had not been in training or apprenticeship in the year after school. For young women, the factors that predicted unemployment at 18/19 were low Standard Grades (having fewer than three awards at 1–

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3), experience of unemployment soon after school and a record of truancy at school. This suggests that personal characteristics may have been relatively important predictors of unemployment for young women.

Escaping low attainment

Just over half (55 per cent) of the low-attaining young people, with no 1–3 awards at Standard Grade in 1992, subsequently gained any form of additional qualification by 1995 when they were aged 18/19. Some of these only achieved a few modules (Table 2). Ten per cent of low-attainers achieved some Higher passes by age 18/19. There were considerable differences between low-attainers who left school after S4 and those who stayed on. More than 90 per cent of those who remained at school until the end of S5 or S6 gained some form of additional qualification, compared only 40 per cent of those who left earlier.

Table 2: Low-attainers' best qualification attained by age 18/19

	Males %	Females %
None after S Grade	45	45
1-9 Modules	24	29
10-18 Modules	4	5
19+ Modules	6	4
Other Voc Course	*	-
Voc Level 1	4	4
Voc Level 2	7	1
Voc Level 3	3	-
1-2 Highers at A-C	4	8
3+ Highers at A-C	4	4
(n)	(637)	(460)

*Less than 1 per cent

However, in the case of young men who left from S4, low Standard Grade attainment appeared to have little impact on whether or not they gained further qualifications thereafter. Irrespective of their Standard Grade qualifications, few S4 leavers gained further qualifications by the age of 18/19. The female pattern was differ-

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ent. Overall, female S4 leavers were more likely to gain some form of additional qualification, but there was a considerable gap between those leavers with slightly better Standard Grades and the low-attainers, who achieved less than low-attaining young men.

Table 3: S4 leavers' best qualification attained by age 18/19

	Males		Females	
	Low Attainers	All S4 Leavers	Low Attainers	All S4 Leavers
	%	%	%	%
None after S/Grade	62	60	71	53
1-9 Modules	17	16	18	23
10-18 Modules	4	3	2	2
19+ Modules	6	7	1	3
Other Vocational	1	2	-	1
Voc Level 1	2	3	7	6
Voc Level 2	2	5	-	7
Voc Level 3	3	5	-	1
1 or 2 Highers A-C	-	-	1	3
3+ Highers A-C	-	-	-	1
(n)	(348)	(696)	(220)	(495)

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Low-attainers are more likely to improve on their qualifications if they remain in full-time education.
What are the advantages and disadvantages of this option?

It is not possible to assess accurately the exact means by which young people improved their qualifications because of the complexity of the routes followed by low-attaining S4 leavers. If we compare their destinations on leaving school we find that the small proportion who entered full-time further education were most likely to gain additional qualifications, followed some way behind by those who entered training programmes. Those who had an initial destination of unemployment or 'something else' were least likely to gain additional qualifications.

Studying towards a vocational qualification, normally at SVQ level II, was by that time (1992–95) an integral part of training programmes. We were therefore surprised by the high proportions of participants on training programmes who failed to achieve any further qualification after S4. Over half of males (54 per cent) and two fifths of females (44 per cent) reported they had not even gained one addi-

SSLS

Vocational qualifications are an integral part of training programmes, but many low-attainers fail to gain even a single additional module. What are the major barriers to gaining qualifications and what can be done to improve certification through the work-based training route?

tional module by age 18/19. This was not primarily due to a high level of respondents dropping out from training, at least amongst young men. We devised a proxy measure of 'completing' training, based on the number of time points for which respondents reported that they were on a training programme. Young men who 'completed' training programmes were more likely than dropouts to have gained some form of qualification, but around half of the 'completers' had gained no further qualification. There was no difference in this respect between low-attainers and better-qualified S4 leavers.

Most members of the 'Reconstructed Cohort' who entered training programmes would have been on Youth Training, as the Skillseekers programme was only beginning to be phased in at that time and was not yet widely available. Skillseekers proved more popular with young people and employers and placed an increased emphasis on gaining a qualification. Although the Scottish Enterprise (1998) evaluation of Skillseekers has highlighted a recent increase in the relatively small proportions gaining a recognised vocational qualification, the lack of certification through the work-based route is likely to represent a continuing area of concern.

Discussion

There have clearly been some very positive developments in attainment over the period covered by the study, with a significant decline in the proportions of young people leaving school with low levels of attainment. However females have been improving their position at a faster rate than the males. While we found differences in the composition of low-attaining males and females, it was beyond the scope of this study to explain gender differences in attainment. The 1999 White Paper on education in Scotland has put a strong emphasis on redressing this gender imbalance. Nevertheless, a recent UN report has shown that a faster improvement in educational performance among girls than among boys is a general trend in countries with literacy levels above 50 per cent – it may not be easy to buck this trend (UN, 1995).

What might be of more concern when considering low attainment is Scotland's relative performance and the impact on economic competitiveness, as well as broader issues of social justice. Some recent reports have expressed concern with the high levels of illiteracy and inadequate numeracy skills among many young people in Scotland, and in Britain as a whole. However we found limited evidence to support the widespread view that disaffection is a principal cause of low attainment. Our results would suggest that tackling neighbourhood deprivation and countering educational disadvantage associated with a young person's family background at an early stage, rather than focusing on disaffection, is likely to be the way forward in reducing low levels of attainment among young people of both sexes. This conclusion underlines the importance of recent initiatives aimed at early intervention, family literacy schemes, study support and New Community Schools, especially for Scotland's most deprived areas.

In a rapidly changing labour market, qualifications are increasingly necessary, and this is a trend that, according to economic forecasts, is likely to continue. Young people who fail to achieve even 'minimum' levels of educational success are likely to become marginalised and prone to long-term exclusion from the labour market. While the majority of low-attaining young men in our study found their way into some form of full-time employment, other research suggests their poor educational performance may have negative consequences in the longer term (Bynner, 1997). Low-attaining young women, on the other hand, appear almost excluded from the start.

Our findings highlight the need for flexibility in the provision for the post-16 age group. Education and training for this group must remain flexible and should not be not closed by barriers such as age or previous participation. It should enable young people to backtrack, make new starts whenever they need to and consolidate their learning and training opportunities. In addition, there appears to be a role for proactive and continuing careers support and guidance to assist these young people through these uncertain times. Low-attaining young women, although fewer in number, represent a group particularly at risk and there appears to be a need to review the types and suitability of provision open to them in education and training.

We found that, contrary to assumptions that low-attainers are best suited to learning opportunities outside of school, most low-attainers upgraded their qualifications through full-time education. However, without further longitudinal data that goes beyond the age of 18/19, we shall be unable to assess whether the limited improvements low-attainers make to their qualifications result in real benefits in the labour market. Policies are beginning to address the needs of this group by providing access to Modern Apprenticeship training for those who leave school at a later stage. However, there is clearly the risk that those low-attainers who remain at school may exclude themselves from the traditional routes to many of the occupations they would be likely to enter.

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